

Transitions and turning points: understanding the career decision-making of outdoor professionals

Introduction

The outdoor industry is an employment area that encompasses a broad range of potential career options, including outdoor education, leisure/recreation and development training (SPRITO, 2001). Although there are attempts to outline career pathways in relation to these areas, it is generally accepted that the outdoor industry lacks a clearly defined career structure. Instead, providers of career guidance within the outdoor industry have highlighted the diversity of potential career routes and emphasise the role of individuals in planning and determining their own career path (Collins, 1997). Inherent in this guidance is the assumption that individuals, when presented with a range of opportunities, will make technical and rational decisions based on their own personalities that lead them towards their particular desired outcome in a progressive way. That is, individuals are viewed as engaging in a process of technical and rational career planning, with career decisions made independently from the social contexts of their lives and work. Research by Allin (2003), however, suggests that women in outdoor education do not typically engage in long term career planning. In addition, research by Barnes (2003) and Humberstone (1995) indicates that the career decisions of outdoor professionals are complex and may be connected to their sense of professional identity. In this paper we explore, through the use of life histories, the extent to which a sociological approach to career decision-making can provide a more holistic understanding of connections and disconnections in the careers of two women outdoor professionals.

Understanding career decision-making

Perhaps the most common approach to career guidance and decision-making has come from the discipline of psychology. A review by Osipow (1990) identifies that the main approaches in this area have been developmental, reinforcement based (e.g. social learning models) and personality focused. Of these, arguably the most well known approach is Holland's (1973) classical theory of vocational choice. This is a personality-based approach that suggests individual attempt to identify congruence between themselves and their appropriate occupational environment. Holland outlined six personality types each of which could be matched to a particular work environment, with the outcome being reflected in terms of job satisfaction and choice stability. Notions of congruence or fit between individuals and organisations have been widely used within careers guidance and in research papers. Indeed, Furnham (2001) acknowledges the central influence of Holland's theory to careers guidance practice, but indicates a key flaw with his and other similar person-environment approaches. Furnham (2001) suggests that a main problem lies in the way organisations or environments are conceptualised as separate from the individuals behaving in them. Even in early social learning theory approaches to career decision making (e.g. Mitchell et al., 1979), significant others in the environment were viewed as modifying and shaping behaviour, instilling skills that can be used to make career decisions in a rather passive way. In contrast, the relationship between individuals and organisations/environments is a dynamic and interrelated one. Moreover, this relationship changes over the life span as people adapt to and change their jobs, and jobs themselves may alter over time. Hence as Furnham (2001) indicates, what was

originally a 'fit' between person and job leading to satisfaction may easily become a 'misfit', leading to job dissatisfaction.

The recognition of developmental change rather than skill acquisition or personality type is highlighted in development approaches such as that of Super (1959, 1980), Ginzberg et al. (1951) and Levinson (1978). These researchers were more concerned to identify age-linked stages of personal growth that could be linked to vocational preferences. Super (1980) for example, suggested that occupational choice represented a person's attempt to implement their self-concept in relation to different life roles. He constructed a model of age and life stages through which individuals develop their vocational preferences, beginning with the stages of growth (0 – 14yrs), exploration (15 – 24 yrs), maintenance (45 – 64 yrs) and decline (65+ yrs). One advantage of Super's work is that it suggests changes in satisfaction with a career choice can occur with changes in the self-concept. However, such developmental models, like much of the early career literature, were based on male career norms. Consequently, Bardwick (1980) proposed a similar life stage model for the career development of women, with key differences in the 30 – 40 yr age range based on suggested identity differences between women and men (see Gilligan, 1982) and women's role in reproduction. Whilst an essentialist approach itself is flawed, a problem with both developmental approaches (as with personality based theories) is that they do not adequately address the importance of ongoing social, cultural and contextual influences on the process of career decision-making. They acknowledge individual change, but more in terms of the self-concept and not in dynamic relation to the organisation.

Socio-psychological models of career choice and development do attempt to address factors in career decision-making at individual, organisational and structural levels. Astin (1984), for example, refers to the way in which women's career decisions are influenced by both the socialisation process and 'structures of opportunity' in the world of work. She identifies four key constructs: motivation, expectations, sex-role socialisation and the structure of opportunity. Here, there is a focus on both the experiences of the developing person and the structural constraints and barriers that impact on the range of opportunities available. Hence there is a beginning of an attempt to understand how the two inter-relate. Chao and Malik (1988) also recognise the interrelationship of structural, organisational and individual factors in their model of career planning for women, but their model does not illuminate the processes through which these interrelationships occur. As with many career development models, it is assumed that career decision-making is a conscious and rational activity where individuals have expectations and make choices in relation to the opportunities available.

In an attempt to bridge theories of career decision-making that separate individuals and external structures, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1996, 1997) presented a sociological model of *careership* drawing from the conceptual tools of Bourdieu (1984) and the notion of identity and lifestyle choices by Giddens (1991). One advantage of this approach is that it can be applied to the careers of both women and men. Although we do not focus specifically on gender in this paper, feminist adaptations of Bourdieu's concept of relationship between habitus and field such as McNay (1999) also allow for the exploration of gender in career decision-making. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) suggest that *careership* involves three interrelated dimensions: Firstly that the decision-making is pragmatically rational, and located in the habitus of the person making the decision. That is, career decisions are derived from what Bourdieu (1984) describes as individual dispositions that arise through their ongoing life experiences and their interactions with others in a particular social arena. They are not purely technical decisions and are made in relation to the range of opportunities that a

person perceives as available and possible, their 'horizon for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997: p34). An individual's horizon for action is not separate from him/her, but influenced both by the available structures of opportunity and their own habitus. That is, what an individual views as possible and available derives from what they know of the employment market and also from their own pre-dispositions. For example, a woman may perceive that the opportunity to be an expedition guide is not available partly because of her awareness and the limited number of positions, but also from her own perceptions whether she can see herself in that kind of position, based on her dispositions arising from her life history experiences. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) further suggest that career decisions are formulated through interactions with others in the 'field' related to the unequal resources that different 'players' possess. Bourdieu's (1984) notion of 'field' refers to a set of structural relations in which different stakeholders are engaged and who have differing resources of power, or capital. The outdoor field could therefore be taken to refer to the outdoor industry, with stakeholders for career decisions including employers and colleagues. Finally, career decisions are located within turning points and routines that make up the life course.

The notion of turning points as the punctuations in a career is common within the perspective of the subjective career, where 'career' is viewed a journey of personal identity (Nicholson and West, 1989). The notion of transitions is also evident in the developmental career theory approach of Super (1980) and in the work of Denzin (1989). These points describe times when there are shifts in individual identities. The twists and turning points of occupational careers, therefore, may be viewed as major and minor shifts and developments in occupational identity over the life course. Whilst *careership* is viewed as an ongoing process, times of re-evaluating professional identity can be understood as times when career decisions are made.

One problem with career turning points is that they are not necessarily predictable. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) point out that this lack of predictability highlights one of the major flaws in models of career development and the notion of career trajectories, where the outcome of career planning is assumed to be knowable in advance. Many career decisions may arise through chance circumstances or be impacted by outside forces as well as previous experiences in the workplace. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) also suggest that career turning points may be divided into three types: Structural, self-initiated, or forced. Structural turning points are the result of external structures of career institutions. They occur, for example, at the end of compulsory schooling or at retirement, when individuals are required to make decisions about their futures. Self-initiated turning points occur when an individual is primarily responsible for the transformation, in response to factors in his/her occupational or organisational life. Sometimes, however, turning points are 'forced', in that they are precipitated by a sudden external event, such as an accident, injury and/or the actions of others, such as compulsory redundancy. Such redundancy is likely to have impacted on many employed in local education authority (LEA) outdoor centres in the UK in the 1990s. The impact of these turning points on individual career decisions will differ among individuals according to their different perspectives and reactions to events and experiences.

Whilst there is a body of research that focuses on career transitions, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) further suggest that an analysis of turning points cannot be divorced from the routine experiences that come before and after. For example, experiences between can be positive and confirmatory or they can be contradictory, undermining an individual's previous career decision and leading to an identity change. An example within Allin's (2003) research showed how contradictions between workplace cultures and gender identities led for some

women to changes in career direction. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) identify three other types of routine: socialising, evolutionary and dislocating. Socialising routines are similar to confirmatory ones, but involve confirming an identity that was not initially desired. Evolutionary routes are more gradual and subtle shifts in identity, perhaps as a person feels a previous social position is no longer suitable. Dislocating routines, however, occur when an individual finds him/herself in a position where they feel a 'lack of fit' and desire to return to a previously held identity. Sparkes and Smith's (2002) account of athletes who have experienced a major injury resulting in disability and cannot come to terms with their new identity would be an example of such a routine. The analytical framework of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) is intuitively appealing for exploring the complexity of outdoor careers. One issue is that their study focused solely on the transition from school to work. Hence any suggestion that *careership* explains career-decision-making across the life span has not been empirically tested. Indeed, the review by Osipow (1990) identified that more attention needs to be paid to what happens to individuals after their entry into the workforce. In addition, a study by Pigden (2000) applied the notion of *careership* to explore the career decisions of undergraduates into their first employment, but found difficulties in interpreting the nature of turning points easily according to Hodkinson and Sparkes' classification. It is argued that understanding the nature of career decisions is important for both career guidance services and policymakers as they strive to support individuals and organisations in an increasingly changing context of work. The extent to which Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) conceptualisation of *careership* is a useful framework for this purpose, however, is not yet clear. In this study, we examine the utility of *careership* for understanding the twists and turning points of the careers of two female outdoor professionals.

Method

The findings for this paper derive from life history interviews undertaken with two women outdoor professionals. The life history is a methodology based within the qualitative paradigm and involves essentially a telling or recounting of a string of events; the unfolding history of one person's experiences (Denzin, 1978). According to Denzin (1989) the method rests on the collection and analysis of stories that speak to turning points in people's lives. Hence the choice of method was consistent with our aim in understanding more about women's experiences of their careers, and was also appropriate for our focus on career transitions and turning points. Because of the recognition that lives are typically recounted as stories of lives, the term 'life story' has also been used interchangeably with life history. More recently, however, studies of the 'life story' have focussed more on unravelling the structure of the storytelling way in which lives are recounted, rather than locating the life as constructed within its historical context. The life history is usually an account of one person's life – here we examine two separate lives – and can be described as partial, topical or complete (Denzin, 1989). Within this study, the life histories are viewed as 'topical' in that they were concerned with the participants' lives in relation to the topic of their outdoor career.

The participants were two women working in different areas of the outdoor industry. They were initially interviewed in relation to two different studies; one a Phd study exploring women's careers in outdoor education by Linda Allin, the second exploring the experiences of women working in the outdoors by Barbara Humberstone. Both women were initially located and approached through personal contacts. The interviews lasted approximately 2 hours. They were conducted in the interviewees' place of work and home respectively.

The decision to combine the two life history accounts for this paper was based on the fact that the women interviewed had worked through two different fields of the outdoor industry and that they had experienced very different lives and career transitions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and significant turning points and experiences around the transitions in interviewees' lives were identified and explored. The first respondent was given the opportunity to view the transcript. However, it was not possible to re-contact the second respondent who appears to have moved abroad. Respondents were provided with pseudonyms for the purpose of the study in order to protect anonymity, and similarly any identifying contextual detail was omitted or names altered. The first respondent, pseudonym 'Sally', also had the opportunity to read the story derived from her interview and the subsequent analysis, and responded that she identified with this portrayal of her life. Her response lends support to the credibility of the interpretation and analysis provided. The second respondent, 'Tessa' has not had this opportunity due to her inaccessibility. The respondents are described as they were at the time of interview.

Results/Discussion

Sally and Tessa

Sally is in her early 40s and has worked in outdoor education for about 20 years. She has a strong physical as well as educational identity and has competed to a high level in her own outdoor activity. At the time of the research she worked in Higher Education, though described herself more as a teacher and outdoor practitioner than an academic. Tessa is in her mid 30s and has worked in outdoor education for about 12 years. Unlike Sally, Tessa has not been involved in conventional sport, disliking PE at school. Although she grew up in the country and was keen on horse riding, owning her own horse for a time. Tessa left school at 18 and worked in an office. At the time of the research she was skipper of a 76-foot ketch, taking mainly young people for sailing residential experiences

Entering the Field

Sally was originally going to be a physical education (PE) teacher when a fortuitous meeting with a student led her into outdoor education training. She applied for her first job in a local authority outdoor centre, but soon became dissatisfied and left two years later to work and travel abroad.

...and I don't think I was very good at it to be honest at that time...because I got disillusioned with the school kids who would come along and just weren't enthusiastic about it (Sally).

Sally's story of her initial entry to outdoor education employment following her training can be interpreted as arising from a structural transition (the end of her training), with her subsequent experience could be described as a 'contradictory routine'. That is, dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the job ultimately led to the decision to continue her chosen career in a different location (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). In her early story, the significance of other stakeholders in the field is also evident. Her entry to outdoor education rather than physical education training arose partly through a chance interaction with someone already within the outdoor field.

Tessa originally wanted to work with horses but was discouraged by her parents. On leaving school she sold her horse and worked in an office for 5 years. She took up badminton where she made friends with a fund-raiser who was raising money to send young people on outdoor activity courses for personal development. As she began to become involved with the group, Tessa was sent on a course with the Outward Bound.

I decided when I was on the course that I could do this for a living (Tessa).

Tessa's story also suggests the influence of interactions with others, as her initial career decision was modified by her parents' attitude and objection to her desire to work with horses. Similarly, a structural transition, leaving school, necessitated some form of identity transition, although here it is evident that her initial work-based identity was not in the outdoors. Her involvement with the fund-raiser brought her into contact with opportunities and her experiences may be described in terms of a socialising routine towards the outdoors, as positive experiences led to her decision to continue in this direction.

Tessa became very dissatisfied with her office job and joined the local mountaineering club, getting as much experience as she could mountaineering and kayaking. After a year ,

I started sending begging letters to Outward Bound to see if they would take me on as seasonal staff and they did. They gave me a nine-month contract (Tessa).

It was noticeable that dissatisfaction with one career decision was occurring simultaneously to a socialising routine and shifting identity in another direction. That is, there were relevant routines in different aspects of a person's life, outside as well as within the working sphere, that were impacting on career decisions. The significance of such ongoing experiences in different 'fields' is something that is perhaps not given sufficient attention in Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) paper from their work, but can be understood through the concepts of habitus and field. These findings support Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) conceptualisation of career decision-making as a process of ongoing, negotiated decisions occurring throughout the changing context of a person's life as well as at more major turning points. Here, Tessa's identity transformation finally culminated in her self-initiated transition to apply for Outward Bound.

Negotiating the field

On return from her travels, Sally took up a peripatetic appointment in the outdoors until dissatisfaction with a lack of recognition for her teaching status led her to look for an alternative. This job she loved, 'working with motivated and enthusiastic adults'.

Part of the enticement of the job was that the centre were asking for an orienteerer/mountaineer, which was made for me...cause that was my original entry into the outdoors, through climbing and walking (Sally).

In this respect, the analysis indicated that Sally experienced a 'contradictory routine' followed by a 'self-initiated transition'. As a consequence of her subsequent change of employment, Sally experienced a 'confirmatory routine' that served to reinforce the career decision she had made (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Here, Sally seems to have been re-investing in a previously preferred identity, relating to her physical identity as an outdoor performer.

Tessa learnt to sail whilst she was at Outward Bound, moving to an overseas Outward Bound where she was very unhappy (a contradictory routine) and returned to the UK. She gained a job as a seasonal instructor at a large local authority centre. Tessa found this a very different from her previous teaching experiences, which had been very focused on personal development through the activities. Now she was

very much taking school kids and then just giving them a taster for a couple of hours (Tessa).

She worked at the centre developing some of the activities, gaining more experience and was promoted to a fixed term contract. However, after three years her contract wasn't renewed. This she saw as a significant turning point.

I think it was the best thing that could have happened really because I needed to move on and not getting my contract gave me the kick up ass to get on with something else (Tessa).

For Tessa, this was an external 'forced' transition. This phase of the story may represent an 'evolutionary' routine, in that there was a gradual shift in identity that may or may not have lead to a turning point. It may be, for example, that her changing work context in terms of promotion mediated against an earlier decision to change. Alternatively, it may be that the dislocation between Tessa's current identity and her previous personal development work may not have been sufficient for a self-initiated change. The 'forced transition' of her contract not being renewed seems to have been a needed change, but one that occurred in a more major way and earlier than might have done otherwise. Here, Tessa was self-reflexive in suggesting that the forced transition brought an underlying mismatch between her habitus and the field to a conscious level.

Tessa then spent three summers as a sailing instructor at a local authority centre where clients ranged from school pupils to adults; to young people with learning difficulties, to undergraduate students gaining qualifications to teach sailing. Here she developed her own career and enjoyed the environment of responsibility.

I really enjoyed the three years I did there...You had a group for the week to teach them to sail...they [the centre] trusted you. You felt as though if you worked hard, it was noticed and you'd get a promotion there, after a year they encouraged me to do courses (such as yacht master.)(Tessa).

For Tessa, it appears that her developing professional identity related to increasing responsibility, building relations and sense of her own personal development in physical skills and qualifications, something that appeared missing in the previous environment. Tessa experienced here a 'confirmatory routine', in that she was happy to continue in this vein, for the time being.

The final turning point

Sally stayed for five years in her instructing role and enjoyed extending her own skills and working with motivated adults. She then changed tack to work in higher education, after her colleagues brought an employment opportunity to her attention. In reflecting on her decision, she explained;

Not that I wasn't keen to continue doing it [her current employment], but all the time I feel that I want to try and improve myself (Sally).

Sally was offered and accepted the job. However, at the time of interview, Sally did not feel entirely comfortable in her occupational position. The findings indicated that an 'evolutionary routine' in her instructional employment was followed by a 'self-initiated transition', as Sally gradually outgrew this career identity. Her subsequent discomfort with the new academic position suggested a possible 'dislocating routine' was in process, as she perhaps was living with an identity she did not like. Indeed, it was proposed that, at the time of research, Sally may have been hankering after a previous identity (see Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). It remained to be seen whether Sally became socialised into her new role or whether her discomfort led to a further turning point in her career.

Tessa didn't gain a permanent post at the sailing centre but achieved more sailing and safety boat qualifications, taking on a variety of temporary jobs during the winter period. Through her contacts at the centre and in particular her landlady who was connected to a linked commercial sailing organisation, Tessa was offered a unique opportunity of getting on a winter training scheme for yacht skippers free of charge.

It was like a year's training. It was the first and last one that even ran, it was a complete one off, so it came along at the right time, I couldn't believe it, if it hadn't been for us chatting in the pub, I would never have pushed and it would never have happened (Tessa).

What this extract revealed was once more the importance of interactions with others in the outdoor field; here for providing social networks (social capital) in relation to particular career opportunities. It may also be suggested that Tessa saw this opportunity as desirable and achievable in relation to her developing predispositions towards her own personal development in skills and qualifications. Through this confirmatory experience, Tessa then continued on in the same vein to become the first woman skipper of a large youth sail training organisation. This has considerable responsibility, something which, at the time of interview, Tessa was very much aware of and seemed to enjoy. Nevertheless, she didn't see this lasting for long.

I think the average life of a sail training skipper is probably about three years before people burn out. People have already said to me that you'll burn out, you won't want to do outdoor pursuits after three or four years anyway (Tessa).

In Tessa's final turning point, it is significant that, despite a seemingly confirmatory routine, ongoing negotiations with others in the field are already impacting on her perceptions and thus shaping the ongoing development of her habitus. Tessa also anticipates a kind of forced transition, due to burn out. These experiences are likely to influence her expectations of what she sees as desirable and possible future career options (i.e. her 'horizon for action').

Summary

The findings show how Sally and Tessa made decisions from within their own culturally situated identities and in relation to their experiences within the contexts in which they found themselves. The findings show some support for the different elements of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) *careership* model in understanding outdoor careers. In particular, there is support for the way in which the process of career decision-making involves ongoing interactions with significant others in the field (often by chance) and evidence of the inseparability of turning points and routines. The turning points and routines of Sally and Tessa's lives were not necessarily smooth or predictable, but reflected their own shifting identities. For Sally, career transitions were largely self-initiated, whilst except for her initial entrance to the field, Tessa's major turning points were notably negotiated in relation to external forces. However, as Pigden (2000) found, it was not always easy to classify these elements. Whilst the lack of contract renewal may be a forced transition for Tessa, for example, she would have known about this sufficiently in advance in order to make a self-initiated change. Hence it was neither completely forced, nor entirely self-initiated. Similarly, the process of being offered and accepting a job seems much more a negotiated transition. Furthermore, there was not always clarity in determining a single turning point event. In addition, in Tessa's final situation, there are elements of anticipation that may mean a self-initiated transition is made without any contradictory routine experiences. Such anticipatory changes are not accounted for in Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1996, 1997) model.

In analysing the career decisions of Sally and Tessa, job changes were interpreted as marking the identity transition. However, the findings show clearly how career decision-making is an ongoing and negotiated process, with much perhaps occurring at a subconscious level. Hence the findings support a need for career guidance that recognises the dynamic relations between individuals and the contexts of their working lives, and is available across the life course. The stories of Sally and Tessa also reveal the complex lives and careers of women working in the outdoors. They show the role of serendipity in entering the outdoors and the enjoyment of particular work experiences. At the same time, they reveal the short term and seasonal nature of many employment opportunities, the disillusionment and disconnections that can occur, and the potential for stagnation. The stories also show the way one person may work across different sectors of the industry, rather than each being a separate strand. Indeed, the ability to capture the often chaotic, complex and ambiguous working lives of outdoor professionals is one of the advantages of life history research. It is suggested that revealing this complexity can provide useful insights to those considering entry to outdoor education as well as to policymakers and those involved in providing support or careers guidance to outdoor professionals.

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